

An Evening of Grounded Theory: Teaching Process through Demonstration and Simulation

Frances Huehls

Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, Indianapolis, Indiana

Grounded theory can be effectively introduced in a survey course through a combination of lecture/demonstration and simulation. The class session presented here illustrates a way to introduce graduate students to the process of grounded theory and gain hands-on experience through simulation. The lesson utilizes concepts that the students are familiar with, allowing them to focus on the research process, and encourages internalization of concepts through immediate application. Key Words: Constant Comparative Method, Grounded Theory, Philanthropy, Qualitative Inquiry, and Simulation

Introduction

Grounded theory may be particularly difficult for beginning student researchers to grasp because the process reverses the order of empirical research—hypothesis generation followed by data collection. The idea that theories can be generated from data—let alone qualitative data—contradicts the scientific tradition they were taught in elementary school science. Students of social problems deal with complex issues that can be analyzed in all of their dimensions by methods of inquiry such as grounded theory, which rely on more than analysis of quantifiable data. This is beautifully illustrated by the grounded theory approach used by Harry, Sturges, and Klingner (2005) in their research of minority student representation in special education.

I teach qualitative research methods within the field of philanthropic studies, a cross-disciplinary area of study that addresses charitable giving, volunteering, and nonprofit/nongovernmental/charitable organizations. Our students can pursue a Master of Arts degree, which examines philanthropy from religious, philosophical, economic, social, historical, and legal viewpoints or can choose a course of study for a master's in public administration focused on management of nonprofit organizations. Both groups are welcome to enroll in the course. Since this is a survey course in qualitative inquiry for master's level students, the amount of time that can be devoted to any particular method is limited. Unless students decide to use grounded theory for their individual research projects, this class session is their only exposure beyond text reading.

My purpose is to present the reader with a detailed description of my evening-long class session on grounded theory in the hope that some or all of what is presented can be used to teach a similar class. I begin with a statement of learning objectives, a brief summary of the session, and a discussion of pedagogical issues. This is followed by detailed narratives describing the lecture/demonstration and simulation components of the class session. Finally, reflective observations, including limitations of the session and modifications that may be necessary to ensure continued effectiveness are made.

Instructors who are teaching grounded theory at an advanced level or in a course dedicated solely to that methodology will find this approach too elementary for their needs. It will be most useful for survey courses and instructors seeking an introductory approach.

The learning objectives for my students are to apply the approach presented in their text, Colin Robson's *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers* (2002) in order to:

- Identify categories within a set of data
- Find relationships within these categories
- Identify core concepts that describe these relationships

In addition, I want them to be able to recognize the use of grounded theory when they encounter it in published research.

The most recent iteration of this lesson was given in two parts: a lecture/demonstration to introduce the students to the *process* of grounded theory, followed by a hands-on simulation exercise that allowed them to work through the mechanics of the process. Since our class met for 150 minutes during the evening, variety in presentation and hands-on involvement helped keep everyone alert and involved. Prior to class, the students were assigned reading from our main text, Colin Robson's *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists and Practitioner-Researchers* (2002).

In line with good teaching practice, the lesson presented was both learning-centered and mindful of individual learning styles. Although student participation may be minimal, lecture presentations are appropriate when the goal is to provide an overview of a process or topic (Saroyan & Amundsen, 2004). The interaction of the simulation that followed the lecture served multiple purposes. Feedback during the simulation informed me of how well the students understood what was presented in the lecture. The interaction of the simulation exercise also affirmed to the individual students that they understood the material presented and its relevance to their course of study. Simulation entails decision-making that encourages cognitively complex thinking (McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Saroyan & Amundsen). The combination of lecture, which presents abstract concepts illustrated with concrete examples, and simulation, which is both active and reflective, provides both comfort and challenges across learning styles (Little, 2004; Mainemelis, Boyatzis, & Kolb, 2002; Terry, 2001).

Lecture/Demonstration

The lecture began by reviewing existing definitions of philanthropic studies, with a focus on broad versus narrow meaning. The students were already familiar with these definitions including "study of voluntary action for the public good" (Payton, 1988b) and "study of voluntary giving for public purposes" (Payton, 1988a), which are deliberately broad and inclusive. As the person responsible for developing a library research collection for philanthropic studies, I had struggled to find a definition with boundaries to exclude some literature but detailed enough to enable intelligent choices. To synthesize an operational definition that would facilitate book selections, I decided to develop a theory of philanthropic studies that was grounded in the literature itself. I pointed out to

the students that it was not feasible to examine a huge body of literature such as the collection of the Library of Congress to find the part that represented the field of philanthropic studies. Because of that limitation, I decided to “interview” the Library of Congress subject headings: the thesaurus used to describe the content of books published in the English language. This five-volume thesaurus was shared around the seminar table to demonstrate the enormity of the data pool of possible subject descriptors.

I reminded the class that I was able to approach this task intelligently because I have more than a decade of experience with literature in the field. Grounded theory is based on the notion that the researcher is informed and ready to make decisions about individual pieces of data—to recognize the “plausible relationships proposed among concepts and sets of concepts” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 278). In my case, this meant going through the five volumes of subject headings and testing each subject heading with a yes/no decision: yes, the subject was related to philanthropic studies or no, there was no relationship. For example, the following table replicates the contents of a page of subject headings and the decision made about each entry (Table 1).

Table 1
Sample of Library of Congress Subject Headings

Benefit of inventory	NO
Benefit performances	YES
Benefit Street (Worcester, Mass.)	NO
Benelux countries	NO
Benet-Mercle machine gun	NO
Beneticos Range (Spain)	NO
Beneux family	NO
Benevento (Italy)	NO
Benevolence	YES
Benevolence in literature	YES
Benfield family	NO
Beng (African people)	NO
Beng language	NO

(Library of Congress Cataloguing Policy and Support Office, 2004, p. 670)

Then from the “yes” group (i.e., benefit performances, benevolence, benevolence in literature) I created a detailed list of terms that, in my judgment, evoked an aspect of philanthropic studies. This list of terms was more than 50 pages long and exceptionally detailed. Projected on a screen using my original word process file, the students were confronted with the need to organize and reduce data. I highlighted a few archaic terms and redundant subcategories of broader terms to demonstrate how these were eliminated as the first step in reducing the list to a manageable size. The next step, which I demonstrated on-screen using the small sample of the table shown below, was to begin to categorize first generally and then more specifically. I thought aloud about the individual subjects: how they related to each other and to the field of philanthropic studies. For example, the approximate dialog would have been:

Abolitionists are people, as are AIDS activists. The other thing they have in common is that they represent donors of philanthropy. The American Cancer Society is a nonprofit organization. Art museums are nonprofits too but they are a general type. Let's go back and code American Cancer as specific and art museums as general. Art patronage is neither a person nor a nonprofit organization. It is an activity of the donor side.

I recorded the categories in brackets next to each subject heading (Table 2).

Table 2

Preliminary Assignment of Categories

Abolitionists	[person—donor side]
AIDS	activists [person—donor side]
American Cancer Society	[nonprofit—specific]
Art museums	[nonprofit—general]
Art patronage	[activity]
Benefit performances	[activity]
Benevolence	[behavior]
Benevolence in literature	[humanities???
Catholic worker movement	[social movement]
Church and social problems	[religion]
Common good	[concept]
Confraternities	[nonprofit—general]
Corporate sponsorship	[activity]
Crisis intervention	[activity]
Cy pres doctrine	[law]
Disaster relief	[activity]
Empathy	[behavior]
Fund raising	[fund raising]
Generosity in art	[humanities???
Green movement	[social movement]
Historic preservation	[activity]
Homeless children	[person—recipient side]
Hunger	[behavior]
Mental health services	[activity]

When these initial assignments were made, I grouped the subjects by category (Table 3).

Table 3

Preliminary List of Subjects by Category

Person—donor side
Abolitionists
AIDS activists

Person—recipient side
Homeless children
Nonprofit—specific
American Cancer Society
Nonprofit—general
Art museums
Confraternities
Activity
Art patronage
Benefit performances
Corporate sponsorship
Crisis intervention
Disaster relief
Historic preservation
Mental health services
Behavior
Benevolence
Empathy
Hunger
Humanities???
Benevolence in literature
Generosity in art
Social movement
Catholic worker movement
Green movement
Religion
Church and social problems
Concept
Common good
Law
Cy pres doctrine
Fund raising
Fund raising

The next step was to look for inconsistencies and errors in the categories. For example, “behaviors” needed to be split into two categories: one for philanthropic donors and one for recipients. Others terms such as “religion” and “concepts” were too vague and could be interpreted in multiple ways. In these areas, I went back to the individual subjects to find where they fit into the scheme—did they originate in economics, sociology, and/or philosophy? The process, I told the class, was to continue to sift and

rework the list, comparing over and over again, until everything fit without being forced. Ultimately, there were 14 categories that encompassed all of the detailed subject headings:

- Individuals involved in voluntary work (i.e., AIDS activists, art patrons, caregivers, civic leaders, environmentalists, gay activists, trustees, and philanthropists)
- Behaviors and attributes associated with individuals involved in voluntary work (i.e., altruism, benevolence, duty, generosity, virtue, voluntarism, and wealth)
- Individuals as the beneficiaries of charitable, nonprofit activity (i.e., beggars, homeless persons, medically uninsured persons, poor women, tramps, and transients)
- Behaviors and attributes associated with individuals as the beneficiaries of charitable, nonprofit activity (i.e., begging, crime, gleanings, gratitude, hunger, and poverty)
- Literature and art (i.e., primary and interpretive works reflecting themes such as abolitionists in literature, generosity in art, humanitarianism in literature, and hunger in art)
- Social movements: history and current activity (i.e., anti-apartheid movement, Catholic Workers Movement, civil rights, and the Green movement)
- Gifts and the gift economy (i.e., common good, corporate philanthropy, public goods, social marketing, and welfare economics)
- Types of nonprofit organizations (i.e., almshouses, art centers, charities, collective settlements, public television, friendly societies, social settlements, and symphony orchestras)
- Specific nonprofit organizations (i.e., American Cancer Society, Rotary International, United Way of America)
- Institutional church as a nonprofit organization (i.e., Buddhist giving, the church and social problems, church fund raising, missions, Christian stewardship, and Zakat)
- Activities of nonprofit organizations (i.e., charity sports events, family services, human services, lobbying, mental health services, performing arts, and social advocacy)
- Management of nonprofit and non-governmental organizations (i.e., accounting, finance, organizational culture, volunteer management, and governance)
- Law of nonprofit organizations (i.e., Cy pres doctrine, poor laws, tax exemption, and charity laws and legislation)
- Fundraising (i.e., benefit performances, telephone fund raising, walk-a-thons, and endowment of research).

I had worked all of my existing data into the scheme, but how did I know if I was finished? According to Robson (2002), saturation is reached when a researcher gathers data to the point of diminishing returns and nothing new is being added. As the 14 categories incorporated all of the subject headings without exception, there was no need to add more. I was also able to point out that since the list was developed in 2002 every book that has been published in the field fits into one of the categories. The longevity of the 14 categories is further evidence of saturation.

The final step in the lecture was to help the class take the process beyond my original purpose of book selection to generating higher-level concepts from the data (Glaser, 2002). I directed them to look more closely at the first four categories. I pointed out that although there were 55 descriptive subjects headings for people involved in voluntary work (i.e., AIDS activist, art patrons, caregivers, civic leaders, environmentalists), there were only 20 that represented the beneficiaries of philanthropy (i.e., beggars, homeless persons, medically uninsured persons, poor women). I proposed that these numbers, which emphasized the importance of donors and service providers, coupled with the qualities that characterized each group (benevolence and generosity versus begging and gleaning) suggested a quality that might be labeled “paternalism.” That is, the subject headings used to describe the content of the literature suggested that the providers of services, although they were often described as benevolent and generous, might exercise authority and control over the poor, homeless, and uninsured. The conceptualization was a new theory that was grounded in the subject heading data. My new theory that paternalism might be an underlying principle in philanthropy would need to be tested in other ways. This might happen through further analysis of literature or through means such as interviews or surveys. Because of the time limitations in the session, this was the stopping point for presenting new material.

In summary, the lecture helped to achieve the stated learning objectives as follows:

- Identify categories within a set of data: selecting the terminology that applied to philanthropic studies from the Library of Congress subject heading list and developing base level categories
- Find relationships within these categories: developing fourteen overall categories to describe the literature of the field
- Identify core concepts that describe relationships: suggesting “paternalism” as a relational concept.

Simulation

When we reconvened after a short break, I explained to the students that they were now going to experiment on themselves as a group to simulate a grounded theory approach to research. We would use a five-step process of research design, data collection, organization, analysis, and comparison to literature (Pandit, 1996). Although the 14 categories that emerged to represent philanthropic studies were derived from documents, other sources of data could be used including interviews, surveys, or observations (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Our research design would use a short survey to gather preliminary data. I handed each student a half sheet of paper with the instruction, “Please write a definition of civil society. It can be based on prior class work, reading, or other exposure you have had to the concept.” I knew that each of the students had encountered the concept in a prior class, but that definitions of civil society were frequently fuzzy and poorly developed. I allotted 5 to 10 minutes for this task. One by one, the students shared their definitions aloud and the elements were recorded on the white board. For example, if the first definition had been, “The term, civil society, is widely used to refer to the worldwide proliferation of formal and informal associations,

organizations, and networks that are separate from, but deeply interactive with, the state and the business sector” (Boris, 1999, p. 1) then the elements broken out would be:

- worldwide (global)
- formal and informal organizations
- networks
- separate from state and business
- interactive with state and business

As each subsequent definition was shared, I asked the students to identify components that were already listed on the board as well as new ones. If the other students did not agree with the definition or the placement of components we tried to reach a consensus. Failing that, those elements were allowed to remain at large. For example, there is often disagreement in these discussions about whether or not a commitment to democracy is a component of civil society and whether or not the concept applies to countries with socialized human services.

Our next step was to use literature that I had brought to class (books, journal articles, and white papers) to resolve these disagreements and to enlarge our evolving definition. I instructed them to read specifically for definitions of civil society that were either explicit or implicit in the texts. The students spent 20 minutes looking through this literature, often erupting into spontaneous discussion about the definitions they were finding. As in the previous step, each student presented what he/she had found that either confirmed elements of our definition or suggested new ones. The categorization of these elements was negotiated with the group.

After much discussion, two definitions emerged: one distinctively American and one with an international flair. Conceptually, the idea of civil society seemed to be culturally determined. Agreeing to accept this bifurcated definition, I directed the discussion to how and where this simulation could become a real study, what subject population would complete the survey, how the class would collect and manage the data, and the ways in which they could deal with exceptions. They had not been in the field, but they had reached the point where they could imagine what it would be like.

Observations

The session worked well for two reasons. First, it utilized two concepts—philanthropic studies and civil society—with which the students already had familiarity. This allowed them to focus on the *process* of grounded theory. The two parts of the class session illustrated the components of the process as shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Process Summary

	Philanthropic studies	Civil society
Microanalysis	Line-by-line analysis of subject headings	Break down components of individual definitions
Open coding	Assignment of general	Group like components of

	categories	definitions
Axial coding	Refinement to 14 categories	Tentative international vs. American definitions
Integration of data	Theory of “paternalism”	Use of literature to locate unifying ideas

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of teaching grounded theory is to define steps for students without implying to them that it is a rote process. The goal, according to Strauss and Corbin (1994), is for researchers to “question, to be able to easily move from what they see and hear and to raise that to the level of the abstract, and then to turn around again and move back to the data level” (p. 8). Deliberately leaving the simulation open-ended helped to reinforce the notion that using a grounded theory approach is iterative, requiring the researcher to devote significant time and effort. Second, the shift from lecture to simulation allowed the students to immediately apply the concepts introduced during the first hour of class. Simulation is not the field, but it is a more effective way to internalize methodology than through solely reading other researchers’ studies or using other more passive means.

During the week following the lecture and simulation, the students read a journal length study that utilized grounded theory. The reading reinforced the concepts covered in class and enhanced the students’ ability to read published research with an eye toward methodology. The practice of discussing this reading at the beginning of the next class session felt limited and inadequate because students could choose not to participate. In the future, I plan to post discussion questions about the reading in our online course manager. The responses will give me better evidence of whether the course objective of being able to recognize and interpret grounded theory in published research has been realized.

Admittedly, a single lesson cannot be comprehensive. The scope does not begin to tap the complexity of theory generation as described by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and does not attempt to reconcile the conflicts over contextualization that divide Glaser and Strauss (Glaser, 2002). An inherent limitation of survey courses is the time available to devote to any topic. A tighter articulation of all course sessions might provide more time for grounded theory, but that is a topic beyond the scope of this paper.

One of the reasons I decided to write this paper was the enthusiasm that students expressed about this class session. Writing it has also helped me see more clearly the content and mechanical components. From the perspective of content, as I have already said, using a familiar context allows the students to focus on the methodology process. On the other hand, a context as specific as philanthropic studies would be unintelligible to students from other fields. Instructors from other fields who wish to adapt this session will have to tailor it to their own particular terminology.

A major satisfaction in teaching this session has been the high level of participation. Up to now the class has been small—fewer than 10 students. This level of participation is likely to be lost as the class size grows to 15 or even 20 students. Group work could be used to facilitate both components of the simulation but the disadvantage of group work is that some students can more easily withdraw from the discussion. To mediate the drop in participation, I could use the online course module to bring the more

reluctant students into the discussion. For example, the students could post their definitions of civil society in the online discussion forum before the class session.

Attending and teaching long evening classes after working an eight-hour day has also spurred me to devise sessions that mix lecture and active components such as simulation. Many of my students also work full days before coming to class. I believe that I teach more effectively and that they learn more effectively if there is variety in the mode of presentation. At the very least, we are all more effective in our respective roles when we remain awake and alert. As the class moves into a new late afternoon time frame this spring, meeting twice weekly for 75 minutes, some adjustments will be needed. Since the lecture will take place two days before the simulation exercise, some review will be needed. In order to conserve time in class, this may take the form of a discussion question in the online forum.

The one thing that is certain is that the class will grow, adjust, and change. What I hope does not change are the students who poke their heads in my office door to say, "That was a really good class the other day!"

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Author Note

Frances Huehls, Ph. D. is an Assistant Librarian for the Philanthropic Studies Collections of University Library and Assistant Professor of Philanthropic Studies at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, 755 W. Michigan Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202 USA. Her email address is fhuehls@iupui.edu

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